

Stanzel, Arnost (Hrsg.): *Wasserträume und Wasserräume im Staatssozialismus. Ein umwelt-historischer Vergleich anhand der tschechoslowakischen und rumänischen Wasserwirtschaft 1948-1989*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2017. ISBN: 978-3-525-30184-5; 378 S.

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The study of hydrotechnical projects can teach us a lot about modernity. In his PhD thesis, Arnošt Štanzel examines dam- and canal-building projects in Slovakia and Romania in the period of state socialism, from 1948 to 1989. He approaches the subject from the viewpoint of environmental history, and explores the changing relationship between humans and nature. Štanzel aims to contribute to an environmental history of the „Eastern bloc“ that avoids over-simplification. The author explicitly contradicts the „ecocide“ narrative that was prominent in the early 1990s with respect to former socialist countries, that has to a certain degree influenced scholarship to this day (p. 21). It describes the discussion of mounting environmental problems as being more or less taboo until the mid-1980s when Gorbachev's *perestroika* and the changing political situation in socialist countries enabled an outburst of environmental debate and protest. According to this narrative, environmentalism was responsible to a large extent for the downfall of the Communist regimes.

Both countries under consideration, (Czecho)Slovakia and especially Romania, deserve more study from an environmental perspective, particularly in the early socialist period. Romania and Slovakia were chosen for comparison because of parallels in their natural geographies, e.g. the favorable conditions for generating hydroenergy in the Carpathian Mountains and the floodplains on the river Danube. In both countries, the regions under consideration were very rural when the Communists came to power, and in both cases the new rulers began to vigorously build socialism, industrialize their countries and create a strong workers' class.

Laying out the theoretical and methodolo-

gical foundations of his work, the author departs from the hybridity of the phenomena he studied, involving both nature and culture, and views nature as being an actor in its own right. Following Dirk van Laak and others, infrastructure is seen as a medium of integration, and the potential of infrastructure to produce and transform spaces is underscored. Štanzel also takes up the concept of „socio-natural sites“ (Martin Schmid/Verena Winiwarter) and extends it to „socio-natural spaces“. Dams, and also water pollution, are parts of specific spaces that are „characterized by socio-economic, political and nature-changing developments—a dam is never just a dam“ (p. 34). Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's well-known three-part conceptualization of space, Štanzel sets out to examine 1. physical space/nature and its usage, 2. political spaces in the sense of mental concepts of space by experts and politicians and 3. social space, i.e. the usage of space by humans aided by symbols and images. Reflecting on interdisciplinary research on space, Štanzel asks which approach to dealing with nature can be observed through the lens of the production of spaces.

Furthermore, he discusses the concepts of modernity and the risk society (Ulrich Beck). The „first modernity“ is characterized by the reduction of material hardship through the use of natural resources. It is combined with the concept of „planning and utopia“ as used by the German historian Lutz Raphael. The „second“, reflexive modernity is characterized by challenging notions of growth and material well-being and the rise of the ideas of sustainability. In order to characterize modernity in socialist states more fully, Štanzel also draws on Zygmunt Bauman's ideas of the state as a gardener and on James C. Scott's idea of the „legibility“ of nature and society. Štanzel understands „legibility“ in a pragmatic way as „those processes [...] which are about researching nature and its contexts in order to utilize them“ (p. 42).

Drawing on a variety of sources including, among others, communist resolutions, expert reports, and articles in special academic journals, the study offers a whole range of important findings. For various reasons, including economic backwardness and the dan-

ger of droughts, Romania was more heavily influenced by the Soviet Union and its „Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature“ (1948) than Czechoslovakia. Initially receiving a great deal of assistance from both countries, Romania gradually managed to become a producer of hydrotechnology itself. The construction of dams in the Carpathians was celebrated as a ‘victory over nature’, and the statue of Prometheus on the Argeş reservoir symbolized this attitude. The extension of hydrotechnical installations accelerated after 1965. Development plans were drawn up for the Moldovan and Wallachian Plains, providing them with water for irrigation, and electricity for industrial plants. The Carpathian valleys, in contrast, did not experience much change. The Romanian regime actively played the role of „gardener“ (Bauman) until the very end of its existence. Štanzel regards the opening of the Danube-Black Sea Canal in 1984 as proof of its acquired skill to „read nature“ and transform it. At that time, the Danube was „cleaned up“, with its parallel arms and meandering branches giving way to dams and gigantic, geometrically-shaped fields. The ideas of sustainability existed but did not influence political planning and decision-making to any significant degree.

In comparison, the Czechoslovak examples offer more variety: After the dam on the Orava in Slovakia had been built, the region was turned into a tourist destination. Nature protection areas were established, and the upper Orava turned into a ‘green island’. This example shows very clearly that the new vision of nature began to develop not in the 1980s (as the ecocide narrative has it) but much earlier, in the 1960s. Štanzel not only compares Romania and Slovakia, but also sheds some light on neighbouring countries as well. In the case of the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Dams, the ČSSR pushed for this joint project, but Hungary was increasingly reluctant and finally dropped out completely. This decision seems to have been based on sustainability considerations; concern for the alluvial forests was much stronger in Hungary than in the ČSSR. For Slovakia, the project had much to do with national prestige, and it finally managed to implement its part of the project, but only in the post-

socialist period. The reason for this success can be found partly in something that Štanzel regards as one of the ČSSR’s characteristics: the close collaboration between political decision-makers and experts during the state-socialist period.

In regard to water pollution, Romania and Czechoslovakia have clear parallels. In both countries, coverage of this subject and discussions about it grew more intense as the situation worsened. Countermeasures and domestic legislation existed, but were often not utilized. As in other socialist states, economic growth remained the top priority, and rivalry between ministries hindered environmental protection.

In the conclusion, the author highlights the parallels between state-socialist and capitalist countries in dealing with natural resources and in the rhetoric used (the fight against nature). Štanzel concludes that „there can be no talk of a [specific] state-socialist relationship between humans and nature“ (p. 324). Notwithstanding chronological differences, the examples studied in this book can be seen in the context of the global process of modernization. While during the period of the „first modernity“, „planning and utopia“ and a utilitarian attitude towards nature were paramount, the „reflexive modernity“ was characterized in both East and West by negotiations and conflict between this traditional attitude and new ideas of sustainability. Other than in Austria, where critical citizens’ initiatives were able to halt the project to build a hydro-electric power plant in Hainburg, in the ČSSR the consensus between politicians and experts could not be challenged by citizens. The strong parallels between East and West ended when ecological and sustainability thinking gained momentum on both sides. Despite the weakness, or even absence, of ecological protest, the author vigorously rejects the ecocide narrative: environmental problems were not an immediate cause of the regimes’ downfall, but rather a consequence of their inability to implement reforms.

The study’s comparative approach proves very fruitful. Its theoretical assumptions and methodological approaches are presented clearly, and future studies will make reference to this. Without losing its coherence, the

book integrates many different factors including foreign policy and inter-state relations as well as changing domestic political priorities and re-purposing of resources. The results of this study are credible and sophisticated. What is more, it is a major advantage that Štanzel broadens his focus to include comparisons and contexts beyond Eastern Europe. Among others, the comparison between socialist-governed Romania and Francoist Spain that he mentions can be advanced further in future.

While there is much truth in the idea that the same logic of resource usage was deployed both in the East and the West, that similar rhetoric was used and that even similar economic-political arrangements can be observed in regard to water usage, the important question remains of whether the state socialist systems' attitude towards nature is not, after all, specific. As an obvious difference between East and West, Štanzel highlights civil society's strength in counteracting unsustainable development. Further, it can be added that the socialist regimes' attitude towards nature was more purely modernist than in Western countries, and more long-lasting. What is more, the role of technology is somewhat neglected in this book, and it was the great affinity of the communists with technical solutions that remains one of the salient characteristics of their periods in power. In view of these open questions, the study is a very timely, stimulating and rich contribution to a growing field and will inspire further discussions in environmental and infrastructural history, and the history of former socialist countries in Europe.

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